

# Mother Mary Comes to Me: A Critical Reading of Arundhati Roy's Memoir on Motherhood, Memory, and Resistance

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**Abstract**— *Mother Mary Comes to Me* (2025) is Arundhati Roy's first full-length autobiographical work since *The God of Small Things* won the Booker Prize in 1997. The memoir reconstructs Roy's complex relationship with her mother, Mary Roy, the Kerala-based educator and women's rights activist whose 1986 legal victory secured equal inheritance rights for Syrian Christian women. This review examines the memoir along four interlocking axes: the emotional architecture of the mother–daughter bond, the feminist and social commentary woven through the narrative, the lyrical and non-linear style that mirrors the workings of memory, and the larger ethical questions about love, grief, and inheritance that the book raises. The paper argues that Roy refuses both hagiography and bitter indictment, instead modelling a mature mode of remembrance in which admiration, resentment, and tenderness coexist. The memoir is read here as both an intimate elegy and an act of cultural critique, extending Roy's long-standing engagement with patriarchy, class, and political violence into the register of personal life writing.

**Keywords**— Arundhati Roy, feminism, Kerala, memoir, mother-daughter relationship.



## I. INTRODUCTION TO THE MEMOIR

*Mother Mary Comes to Me* is a powerful memoir written by the Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy, published in September 2025. It is her first full-length autobiographical work since *The God of Small Things* won the Booker Prize in 1997. The book explores the complex relationship between Roy and her mother, Mary Roy, a well-known educator and women's rights activist from Kerala. Unlike ordinary autobiographies that focus mainly on achievements or success, this memoir concentrates on emotional truth, family conflict, memory, grief, and understanding. Roy presents her mother not as a perfect parent but as a strong, difficult, loving, and deeply complicated human being. In the cultural and spiritual landscape of Kerala — a setting central to Roy's literary imagination — Mother Mary is not merely a biblical figure but a foundational symbol of unconditional love, enduring grief, and quiet resilience. Mary Roy was famous for challenging patriarchal laws and fighting for equal inheritance rights for women. She was admired publicly as a courageous reformer, yet within the family her personality created emotional struggles and conflicts. Roy honestly describes how her mother's intelligence, ambition, and dominance shaped her childhood and adult life.

One of the most striking features of the memoir is its emotional honesty. Roy does not try to hide painful experiences or present her family in an idealised manner. Instead, she writes openly about fear, anger, love, resentment, and admiration. This honesty makes the memoir realistic and relatable. Readers can understand that family relationships are often complicated and cannot be explained in simple terms of right or wrong.

The title itself, *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, suggests memory, longing, and emotional return. Even after years of separation and disagreement, Roy realises how deeply connected she remained to her mother. The memoir becomes not only a story about one woman but also a reflection on motherhood, womanhood, identity, and healing.

Another important aspect of the book is its literary style. Roy's language is poetic, descriptive, and emotionally rich. Her writing creates vivid pictures of Kerala's landscapes, family homes, classrooms, and emotional tensions. The memoir combines storytelling with reflection, making it both intellectually engaging and emotionally moving.

Overall, the memoir introduces readers to a deeply personal world while also addressing universal themes such

as family conflict, female independence, memory, and emotional survival. It is a courageous and thought-provoking work that leaves a lasting impression on readers.

## II. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

In *Mother Mary Comes to Me*, the mother–daughter relationship is one of the emotional centres of the work. Roy presents this relationship as deeply loving, complicated, painful, and shaped by memory, gender expectations, and generational conflict.

### 2.1 Central Nature of the Relationship

The narrator's relationship with her mother is not shown as simple affection or hatred. Instead, it is filled with emotional dependence, admiration, resentment, misunderstanding, and lasting attachment. The daughter often sees her mother as a powerful and independent woman, yet also as someone emotionally distant and difficult to understand. The mother becomes both a source of strength and emotional struggle.

As a child, Roy experienced both affection and fear in her relationship with her mother. Mary Roy wanted her children to be disciplined and successful, but her methods often caused emotional pain. Roy explains that living with such a strong personality made her childhood unstable and emotionally difficult. At times, she felt trapped within her mother's world and struggled to find her own identity.

### 2.2 Feminist Inflections of the Bond

The mother–daughter relationship also reflects Roy's feminist concerns. Through the mother's life, Roy explores the limitations placed on women, emotional loneliness, the pressures of marriage and social conformity, and the struggle for selfhood. However, the memoir does not simply criticise Mary Roy. Roy also deeply admires her mother's courage and determination. Mary Roy challenged patriarchal traditions in Kerala and fought an important legal battle that helped women gain equal inheritance rights. She founded a progressive school and became a respected educator. Roy recognises that her mother's strength inspired her own rebellious spirit and independence.

This mixture of admiration and resentment gives emotional depth to the memoir. Roy shows that human relationships are rarely simple. A person can hurt us deeply while also shaping our strengths and identity. Roy inherited her mother's courage, intelligence, and refusal to accept injustice, even though she also suffered because of her mother's behaviour.

### 2.3 Distance, Grief, and Understanding

The memoir also explores emotional distance. Roy left home at a young age because she felt she needed freedom

and independence. Yet even after leaving, her mother remained emotionally present in her life. Their relationship continued to affect Roy's thoughts, emotions, and writing. After Mary Roy's death, Roy experienced grief mixed with confusion and reflection. She realised that despite all the conflict, her mother remained central to her emotional world.

An important message in the memoir is that understanding someone does not necessarily erase pain. Roy does not offer complete forgiveness or simple reconciliation. Instead, she develops a deeper understanding of her mother as a woman shaped by loneliness, social pressure, ambition, and struggle. This mature understanding makes the memoir emotionally powerful and realistic. Through this relationship, Roy explores universal questions about family bonds, emotional inheritance, and the difficulty of truly understanding the people closest to us. The mother–daughter relationship becomes both deeply personal and universally meaningful.

## III. FEMINISM AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Arundhati Roy uses *Mother Mary Comes to Me* to explore the lives of women and the social realities that shape them. The work combines personal memories with broader political and social commentary. Feminism in the text is not presented as a theory alone; it appears through the everyday struggles, emotions, and experiences of women.

One of the central feminist ideas in the book is the struggle of women to live freely in a patriarchal society. Female characters are shown facing restrictions imposed by family and society, expectations of obedience, emotional suppression, and limited personal choices. Roy highlights how women are often judged more harshly than men and are expected to sacrifice their individuality for family and social respectability.

Mary Roy's legal battle for equal inheritance rights became an important moment in Indian women's history. In Syrian Christian communities in Kerala, women often received limited property rights compared to men. Mary Roy fought against this injustice in court and won a historic case that improved women's legal rights. Roy presents her mother as a woman who refused to remain silent in the face of discrimination.

At the same time, the memoir shows that social struggle often comes with personal costs. Mary Roy's determination and ambition made her successful publicly, but they also created emotional strain within the family. Roy suggests that women fighting oppressive systems are themselves shaped by pain, pressure, and emotional conflict. This

makes the memoir more realistic because it avoids presenting feminism in simplistic terms.

Roy's own life also reflects feminist ideals. She chose independence over social conformity and developed a strong public voice through literature and activism. Like her mother, she questioned authority and challenged injustice. The memoir suggests that rebellion and courage can be passed from one generation to another.

### **3.1 Social Issues in the Work**

**Patriarchy.** Patriarchy is one of the major social issues explored in the text. Men traditionally hold authority in society, while women are expected to remain submissive. Roy criticises gender inequality, male dominance, and the social systems that silence women.

**Social Expectations and Judgment.** The book shows how society controls women through moral expectations and public judgment. Women are often criticised for personal choices, emotional expression, independence, or non-traditional behaviour. Roy exposes the emotional damage caused by such societal pressures.

**Emotional Isolation.** Many characters experience loneliness and emotional suffering despite living within families or communities. Roy suggests that social structures often fail to provide emotional understanding, especially for women.

**Class and Social Inequality.** Like many of Roy's works, the text also reflects concerns about inequality and injustice. Differences in class, privilege, and social power affect relationships and opportunities. Roy subtly connects personal suffering with larger social systems.

**Silence and Trauma.** The work examines how pain and trauma are often hidden within families. Silence becomes a recurring social issue: women hide emotional wounds, families avoid difficult truths, and society ignores suffering that does not fit accepted norms. Roy portrays memory and storytelling as ways of breaking this silence.

The memoir therefore becomes more than a personal story. It also acts as a social commentary on Indian society and the pressures faced by women and families. Roy successfully combines intimate storytelling with political reflection, making the memoir intellectually meaningful as well as emotionally engaging. Through feminism and social criticism, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* encourages readers to question traditional ideas about family, gender roles, and emotional strength. It celebrates courage and independence while also acknowledging the emotional complexity of human relationships.

## **IV. STYLE, LANGUAGE, AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES**

The language, style, and narrative techniques in *Mother Mary Comes to Me* reflect Arundhati Roy's distinctive literary voice — poetic, politically charged, emotional, and deeply reflective. The work combines personal memory, social criticism, and lyrical storytelling to create a powerful reading experience. Readers familiar with her novel *The God of Small Things* will recognise the same lyrical quality and rich imagery in this memoir. Roy has the ability to describe ordinary moments with extraordinary beauty and emotional depth.

The memoir is written in a reflective and personal tone. Roy often moves between past and present, memory and reflection. Instead of following a strict chronological order, the narrative flows according to emotions and recollections. This non-linear structure reflects the natural movement of memory: human memories do not always appear in order; they return unexpectedly, connected by emotions rather than time.

### **4.1 Style of Language**

**Poetic and lyrical language.** Roy uses highly descriptive and musical language. Her sentences often flow like poetry, filled with imagery, rhythm, and emotional intensity. Ordinary moments are described with beauty and symbolism, giving the narrative a dream-like quality through rich metaphors and similes, sensory descriptions, and emotional and symbolic vocabulary. This lyrical style helps readers feel the emotional depth of the characters and themes rather than simply understand them intellectually.

**Simple yet powerful expression.** Although Roy's language is literary, she often uses simple words and conversational phrases. The simplicity makes the emotions feel natural and authentic. Her writing balances sophistication with accessibility.

**Political and social tone.** Roy's language frequently carries criticism of social inequality, patriarchy, religious hypocrisy, political violence, and colonial influence. She blends artistic narration with political commentary, making the story both personal and socially meaningful.

**Emotional intensity.** The narration is deeply emotional. Feelings such as grief, love, loneliness, anger, and hope are expressed openly and honestly. Roy's language creates intimacy between the narrator and the reader.

### **4.2 Narrative Techniques**

**Non-linear narrative structure.** Roy often avoids chronological storytelling. Instead of presenting events in a straight sequence, she moves back and forth between past memories, present reflections, and emotional recollections.

This fragmented structure mirrors the way memory and trauma work in real life.

Stream of consciousness. At several points, the narration follows the flow of thoughts and emotions rather than a logical sequence. This technique allows readers to enter the inner world of the characters through sudden memories, repeated ideas, emotional reflections, and interior monologue.

Symbolism. Roy uses symbols to add deeper meaning to the narrative. Common symbolic elements include motherhood, religion, nature, silence, and water and darkness. "Mother Mary" itself can symbolise compassion, suffering, protection, and spiritual motherhood.

Personal and political blending. One of Roy's strongest techniques is combining private experiences with larger political realities. Individual pain reflects wider social suffering, and personal stories become a way to discuss national and historical issues.

Vivid imagery. Roy creates strong visual pictures through detailed imagery. Readers can clearly imagine places, emotions, weather, and physical surroundings. The imagery often reflects the psychological state of characters.

Use of irony and contrast. Roy frequently contrasts beauty with violence, innocence with cruelty, religion with injustice, and love with oppression. This contrast strengthens the emotional and political impact of the narrative.

Overall, Roy's narrative technique makes the memoir emotionally moving and artistically sophisticated. Her ability to combine poetic language with psychological insight creates a memorable reading experience. The memoir demonstrates her talent not only as a novelist but also as a reflective and courageous memoirist.

## V. CONCLUSION AND PERSONAL RESPONSE

*Mother Mary Comes to Me* is a deeply emotional and thought-provoking memoir that explores the complicated relationship between a mother and daughter. Through honest storytelling and powerful language, Arundhati Roy presents a portrait of Mary Roy as both an inspiring reformer and a difficult parent. The memoir avoids simple judgments and instead shows the emotional complexity of family relationships.

One of the greatest strengths of the memoir is its honesty. Roy openly discusses painful memories, emotional conflict, and personal confusion without trying to create a perfect image of herself or her mother. This honesty makes the memoir realistic and emotionally powerful. Readers can

relate to the idea that love and pain often exist together within families.

The memoir also succeeds as a feminist work. Mary Roy's courage in challenging patriarchal laws and building an independent life is inspiring. At the same time, Roy shows that strength and ambition can have emotional consequences. This balanced portrayal makes the memoir more meaningful because it presents women as fully human rather than idealised figures.

Personally, the memoir creates a strong emotional impact because it encourages readers to think about their own family relationships. It reminds us that parents are not perfect and that understanding another person's struggles requires empathy and maturity. Roy's reflections on grief and memory are especially moving because they show how complicated emotions continue even after death.

The literary style of the memoir is another major achievement. Roy's poetic language, vivid descriptions, and emotional insight make the book intellectually rich and artistically beautiful. The memoir also raises important questions about identity, freedom, forgiveness, and emotional survival. It suggests that people are shaped both by love and by conflict. Roy's relationship with her mother caused pain, but it also influenced her creativity, independence, and political consciousness. This complexity makes the memoir realistic and psychologically profound.

In conclusion, *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is not only a memoir about one family but also a universal exploration of motherhood, feminism, memory, and emotional truth. It is a courageous and beautifully written work that leaves readers with a deeper understanding of human relationships and personal identity. The memoir confirms Arundhati Roy's position as one of the most powerful and insightful contemporary Indian writers.

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